

A Social Europe Requires Solidarity

Wolfgang Strengmann-Kuhn wrote about the need for a more social Europe. This guest commentary was published on the website of www.freitag.de on March 2nd 2016.

This is a translation:

Visible cracks are beginning to appear within the European Union. In June, the UK will vote on leaving the EU; the refugee debate is dominated by national self-interest; the nation-state mind-set is again gaining ground and is linked with alarming trends. Cohesion within the European Union is under threat, yet is more urgently needed than ever: both amongst the states and, even more so, amongst people in the individual states. In order to repair the cracks, which are appearing, the promise of social welfare embodied now and in the past by the European Union must be renewed and placed on a new footing. To this end, we need a strong social Europe, which acts as a guarantor, reducing inequalities and ensuring participation for all.

Younger citizens take it for granted that they are able to travel freely within the European Union. Freedom of movement is indeed one of the EU's most important achievements and it is only now, in the context of debates on border closures and the building of border fences, that many people are realising what it would mean if this freedom were to be restricted once again. Instead of erecting new fences, it is important to develop freedom of movement further and to remove obstacles. In order for people to genuinely enjoy freedom of movement in Europe, this freedom of movement must be accompanied by (measures for) social security. Because people will only truly be able to move freely when their basic right to a secure existence is safeguarded. A first sensible step would be to ensure that EU citizens actively seeking work in another country receive support. Provided they live in the country longer than three months, they should have access to basic social protection in the country concerned.

In the long term, we should work on realising the vision allowing all EU citizens to move freely throughout the European Union and to have access to social protection in doing so. We still have a long way to go on this and we must create the necessary conditions step by step. One of these conditions should be the actual existence of an adequate basic social protection system in every country of the EU – so that people are not forced to move to other Member States purely due to material insecurity. The European Union certainly has the power to influence the individual countries on this issue, through a collective agreement on targets, for example. Yet a legally binding commitment to certain core elements in the form of a minimum-income directive would be even better. The concrete implementation of the directive would be a matter for the Member States.

All of this is already possible today within the framework of the European treaties, without any amendments, and would be an important cornerstone of a social Europe. Yet we should be prepared to go a step further to achieve social cohesion in Europe. Reducing poverty has long been an important goal for the EU. It is thus logical to take a Europe-wide approach to poverty reduction. A Brussels institution responsible for assessing income, assets and the individual needs of those concerned in all Member States would be far too bureaucratic, however, and would most likely simply be off-putting. A simpler tool would be the implementation of a basic income paid to all EU citizens in a unitary amount. This European basic income would have to be supplemented by national social security systems tailored to individual needs. Even a low level of basic income – 100 to 200 euros – could create a foundation, which could then be topped up by means of national social benefits. In the poorer countries of the EU, a basic income of this kind would be almost sufficient to cover people's basic material needs. In richer countries, it would simply be offset against the social benefits and tax allowances to which people are already entitled. In order to finance this system, a certain proportion of taxes and/or social-security contributions would be paid into a European fund, which would then be used to pay out the basic income. In this way, the people living in the EU would receive a direct payment every month from Brussels. This is likely to make people much more positive about the EU; it would strengthen social cohesion and reduce the economic pressures triggering migration flows resulting from material insecurity.

As a first step, the idea of a basic income could be developed just for certain sections of society. For example, it could take the form of a European basic child benefit paid out to all children of EU citizens. To some extent, this would take the wind out of the sails of the child-benefit discussion initiated by the British. A basic form of unemployment insurance would also be conceivable. The introduction of a European basic unemployment insurance is currently being discussed and demanded mainly for economic reasons. A well-thought-out concept for a European basic unemployment insurance would automatically have a stabilising effect, helping to maintain the economic balance within the European Union in times of crisis. It could also be a sensible first step towards Europeanisation of social protection.

All of these measures could help strengthen the weakened solidarity and cohesion between all EU nations and their people – since they are both relevant to people's lives. They allow people to see that the European Union is more than just "them in Brussels", not just some aloof institution, which is far removed from them and their lives.

Dr Wolfgang Strengmann-Kuhn is Spokesman on Social Policy for the Green Parliamentary Group at the Bundestag, as well as a member of the Committee on the Affairs of the European Union.